

Countries of Particular Concern: Burma

Repression by the military regime in Burma is widespread and continues systematically to include severe violations of religious freedom and other abuses. The government exercises strict control over many religious activities, imposes restrictions on certain religious practices, and, in some areas of the country, forcefully promotes Buddhism over other religions.

Members of minority religious groups, especially those in the ethnic minority areas, face serious abuses of religious freedom and other human rights on account of their religion. In some localities, the military reportedly has forcibly conscripted members of religious minorities as porters and killed those who have refused. Christians have been forced to engage in the destruction of churches and graveyards for the purpose of clearing sites for military camps. Christians, as well as Muslims and Buddhists, reportedly have also been forced to "donate" labor to build and maintain Buddhist pagodas and monasteries. In addition, local officials have separated Christian children from their parents, with the children receiving instruction in Buddhism without their parents' knowledge or consent.

The government has prohibited public Christian religious expression and persuasion among ethnic minorities and has enlisted the cooperation of pro-government Buddhist monks to convert members of ethnic minorities to Theravada Buddhism. In at least one instance, Christian clerics were beaten to discourage attempts at religious persuasion.

The Burmese military has also instigated violence by the Buddhist majority against Christians and Muslims. In the past few years, tensions between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in Burma resulted in several outbreaks of violence involving members of the Buddhist community who attacked shops, restaurants, and homes owned by Muslims. During one particular outbreak, police and soldiers reportedly stood by and did not attempt to halt the violence against the Muslims until they began to fight back.

The government of Burma has severely discriminated against members of minority religious groups in education, publishing, building permits, and access to public sector services and jobs. Christian and Islamic groups continue to report difficulties in obtaining permission to build new churches and mosques. These groups also have had difficulties importing religious literature since the 1960s.

The majority Buddhist religion is not protected from government repression. Throughout the 1990s, the government imprisoned more

than 100 Buddhist monks for advocating democracy and encouraging dialogue between the government and the pro-democracy forces. Many members of the Buddhist clergy remain in prison; though a precise number is unavailable, credible sources report that this number has risen since May 2003, when the Burmese government, after organizing an attack on her motorcade, placed Aung San Suu Kyi under "protective custody."

The military regime is suspicious of all organized, independent religious activity because clergy and religious followers of Buddhism and minority religions have been politically active in opposition to the regime. Some ethnic minorities for whom Christianity and Islam are a defining feature have been, or continue to be, involved in armed insurgencies against the government. Buddhist monks have also been active in the pro-democracy movement.